

Beyond the qualitative/quantitative split: alternate forms of research in the information space

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Title of proposed session: Beyond the qualitative/quantitative split: alternate forms of research in the information space

Description

Within information schools, multidisciplinary has most typically meant the extension of “information science” to include social science, and the use of qualitative as well as quantitative research methods. The ultimate goal of research, as presented, for example, in research methods courses, is generalizable and predictive knowledge. There is also an emphasis on research that has clear practical implications. The University of Washington’s iSchool, for example, concludes its mission statement by declaring that “we make information work,” which implies that information research must go beyond mere understanding of how “information works” and into application, or *making* it work. Other mission statements also support this implied notion. U.C. Berkeley’s mission statement asserts that the school “pioneers solutions,” and the University of Michigan states that its research is intended to “[unify] human-centered design approaches and sophisticated technologies.”

In contrast, research in the humanities, design, and the arts is more likely to eschew goals of generalizability and predictability, focusing more on exploration, illumination, originality, and innovation. Such fields deemphasize standard methods, relying to a greater degree on the creativity of the researcher. Research in this vein is also less apt to have explicit ties to immediate practical concerns.

In this discussion, we will explore the differing research goals and methods exemplified by the humanities, design, and the arts, and ask how such goals and methods might be incorporated into the information space.

We propose a combination of the traditional panel presentation with a roundtable discussion. The four organizers will introduce the discussion by briefly (five minutes each) describing their dissertation projects and associated methods. All these projects involve both nontraditional methods for information science (drawn from the humanities and/or design research) and the integration of multiple methods. These projects will serve as case studies to ground and propel the discussion. We hope to engage the audience in such questions as the following:

- Can information “science” be further broadened to include the humanities, design, and the arts?
- What opportunities might be afforded by more fully integrating a range of diverse methods into the information space?
- Is there a role, in information schools, for research that is not closely aligned with practical concerns?
- How can information schools support such research in the context of an academic climate that places increasing priority on external funding from grants and corporate sponsorship?
- Do we need to consider establishing some balance between different approaches to research? If so, what guidelines should be used to “monitor” such a balance? Who should be involved in such monitoring—the profession, school administrators, professional associations, peer-reviewed publications, individual researchers?
- If the information space can be broadened, what implications would that hold for future methods classes in information schools?